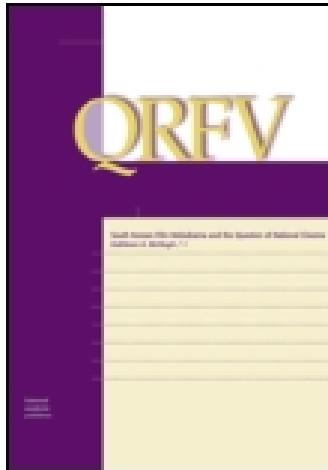


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### The Mask of Beauty: Masquerade Theory and Disney's Beauty and the Beast

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## The Mask of Beauty: Masquerade Theory and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

LARA SUMERA

There is evidence of patriarchal codes as well as opposing feminist characteristics within Disney animated feature narratives (see Mulvey, Doane, Downey). Starting with the sassy Ariel of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the intellectual and sophisticated Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), right down to the strongly independent *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998), such feminist qualities fronted by the heroines are foregrounded to mask Disney's engrained conservatism, evidenced in its films by its stringent adherence to the patriarchal order. Patriarchy remains intact and feminism masquerades within the Disney fairy-tale narratives of the 1990s. While Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," argues that women spectators either identify with the passive female character in a film or the male as the active viewer, Mary Anne Doane presents an intriguing alternate argument in her essay "Film and the Masquerade." Doane says that the

Spectatorial desire is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging—framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. (43)

It is the gaze at the female by both male and female spectators that supports Doane's contention that a film can be read by an intelligent and active audience. Doane was influenced greatly by Joan Riviere half a century before her who wrote, "Femininity does not exist, but is only a mask to cover the woman's lack and her desire to appropriate the authority of masculinity" (qtd. in Carlson 537). Doane's premise was based on Riviere's conceptualization of the woman's "transex identification" (Doane 48), which is due to the female's sexual mobility according to Mulvey's concept of "the gaze" being constructed as strictly male.

It follows, according to Doane, that the female spectator will feel a theft of masculinity and therefore will foreground her femininity, like a mask, for particular gains. The woman behind the mask is a mystery, and she possesses "an inaccessible though desirable otherness" (Doane 42). This theft of masculinity is compensated through the excessive feminism the woman exhibits, but in flaunting femininity she actually holds it at a distance (Doane 49). This distancing has placed both the female spectator and protagonist in a position that Doane describes as being consumed by the image rather than consuming it. She cannot fully embrace her femininity without revealing her weakness compared to the male other.

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Rather, then, she wears her femininity as a mask, taking it on and off as she needs to in order to make up for her missing masculinity.

The mask is worn to gain authority, or power, or respect, but underneath all that, a set of patriarchal codes remains unmasked. Disney, as a fairly conservative film company, has released several films taken from previously conceptualized stories and changed certain elements within the narratives to conform to the traditional values that Walt Disney endeavored to advocate in his career (O'Brien uses *Cinderella* [1950] and *The Little Mermaid* [1989] as examples). Even after Disney was gone, the company held on to its conservatism, as this essay will demonstrate, despite counter claims of more feminist female protagonists. The concern of this paper is on how Team Disney deals with the pressures of a feminized society and yet maintains a conservative creed in homage to Founder Disney. More specifically, looking at 1991's *Beauty and the Beast* (Disney's first film written by a woman, Linda Woolverton), how can Doane's masquerade theory be applied?

In a 1996 study printed in *Women's Studies in Communication*, Keisha Hoerrner analyzed 11 Disney animated feature films, comparing and contrasting modes of behavior between female and male characters, heroes and villains. The study found that more contemporary characters such as Ariel and Belle show more vocalization "in opposing unfair treatment they experienced" compared to older characters like Cinderella and Snow White who "suffered injustices without uttering a complaint" (Hoerrner 223). There are obvious evolutions in the genre of fairy tales. Sharon Downey does an extensive analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* in her article "Feminine Empowerment in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*." In her essay, she takes on an alternative reading of the patriarchal codes of which Disney fairy tales have been accused.

In articulating both male and female spectatorship in the film text, Downey suggests that a polysemy of interpretations can be read, including female empowerment. Power is viewed as having a relational nature, calling into question patriarchy itself, when both male and female are interdependent on one another. Such an interpretation goes against the grain of most feminist readings and opens the doors for alternate interpretations, even that which empowers the feminine rather than suppresses it under the dominance of a patriarchy. But as this paper will deconstruct, the so-called empowerment of feminine protagonists only appears as a subversion of the patriarchy in the context of the masquerade. The feminism so flaunted by Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* ultimately supports a patriarchal culture.

In "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom," Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario does an analysis of the Disney princess archetypes, which show a noticeable absence of mothers and male siblings. Often the heroine is without a brother, which "implicitly condones the patriarchy by a daughter" in the various narratives (53). Making the fathers past their primes (often widowed and old), not involved in any romance themselves, puts the whole weight of the kingdom on the shoulders of the princess who must marry (*Sleeping Beauty* [1959], *The Little Mermaid* [1989], *Aladdin* [1992] are some examples). Even in the case of Belle, it is not only the Beast, but also his whole castle that relies on Belle to reverse the curse. Typically, to the fathers' initial dismay, the daughters of these films choose unacceptable and inappropriate suitors whose own adventures parallel that of the princesses in realizing the dream of another world.

In the case of Belle and the Beast, her father mentions Gaston as a potential prospect, but he happens to be furthest from Belle's dreams. And though she eventually chooses the Beast, it is the Beast that holds the father prisoner, takes Belle in exchange, and whom the father (and later the townspeople) try to hunt down. Unbeknownst to them all, even Belle, the Beast-turned-hero is revealed by the end of the movie as a handsome prince, and the fairy-tale ending is complete. The hero and heroine fulfill each other's dreams. Gaston

is revealed as the true beast, the Beast is revealed as the one with the truly handsome character.

From the princesses under Disney himself (Snow White, Aurora, Cinderella) to the princesses under Team Disney (Ariel, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan), they have become “progressively proactive” which, Do Rozario argues, does not necessarily constitute a return to the “former patriarchal structures.” And though “the Disney kingdom may still seem a man’s world [...] it is a man’s world dependent on a princess” (57). Taking an opposing view, Kathi Maio says, at heart, that the women of Disney feature films “still identify with male authority instead of seeking their own empowerment. And in the end a good-looking boyfriend remains the truest measure of feminine happiness and success” (“Disney’s Dolls”). But do these codes of happily ever after—that is, marriage—support the earlier desire of the heroine to live a different life and to do the unexpected? Feminist defenders would say that these heroines mask independence as rebellious, or seek more than their immediate surroundings, only to later negate these desires to flee their constraints by reverting back to a patriarchy through marriage.

O’Brien’s article “The Happiest Films on Earth” analyzes and compares Disney’s *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* on a variety of planes. One is that *Cinderella* was made during Walt Disney’s directorship of the company, but *Mermaid* was done two decades after his death. As a corporate entity, the Disney Company still codes the formula of a patriarchal society within its fairy tales, just as Walt Disney originally did, and audiences continue to eagerly accept this formula. Another point of examination is the changes the Disney company made to both films, contrasting largely with their original storylines, taking out positive mother and sister figures, or leaving them out altogether, to reinforce the reliance on a patriarchy. Recalling Do Rozario’s argument of the missing mother and male siblings, this reliance on a patriarchy, perpetuated by the reverence of the princess as fulfilling the prince, is especially applicable to the Beast so dependent on Belle’s love for him to end the curse.

In her discussion of fairy tales, Marcia Lieberman makes the argument that traditional fairy tales uphold traditional values, and instead of introducing feminist ideas, original fairy tales actually “acculturate women to traditional social roles” (383). As argued by Byrne and McQuillan in *Deconstructing Disney*, domesticity is a goal for Disney’s heroines, using examples such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Beauty and the Beast* to prove their point. Snow White domesticates the Dwarves; both the Beast and Gaston offer Belle a domesticate role as wife. Jack Zipes, in “Breaking the Disney Spell,” agrees with this view of the recurring theme of the domestication of Disney women. He describes Disney’s heroines as “helpless ornaments in need of protection, and when it comes to the action of the film, they are omitted” (Zipes 37).

In an example of *Beauty and the Beast*, when Belle is attacked by a pack of wolves, it is the Beast that comes to her rescue while she can only helplessly stand aside. He is then badly injured, and Belle takes him back to the castle to mend his wounds. Her attempt to break free from her imprisonment is suddenly forgotten. In Patrick Murphy’s essay, “The Whole Wide World was Scrubbed Clean,” he sees action, particularly the use of magic, by the heroines as “a perversion of the natural” (Murphy 133), as if only the male could wield such power. An example is in the opening sequence of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, revealing the back-story of how the Prince was turned into the Beast:

One winter’s night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold. Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the prince sneered at the gift and turned the old woman away, but

she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within. And when he dismissed her again the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress. The prince tried to apologize, but it was too late.

The film begins with a literal disguise the enchantress masquerades as a lowly, old woman to test the Prince. It is the mask of beauty in reverse. The treatment of power in this scene is to that of the beautiful enchantress, and the Prince is forced by her to shed his beauty to become "a hideous beast." The enchantress' power is an example of what Murphy calls the "perversion of the natural." That is, the enchantress' femininity becomes hidden as the old, haggardly woman, and her beauty is not used as a mask to gain some end. Instead, she purposely sheds her beauty to appear lowly. Feminine beauty is not flaunted to gain power or position, but only as a magical enchantress can a female character hold power over a male such as the Prince. Were she only a beautiful woman and not supernatural, it would not be enough to make the selfish Prince change. Power is reversed (the male cowers before her) when femininity is masked rather than the mask.

Further, Murphy says that when the heroine does engage in action, it is to build the romantic relationship and further the male-female cultural order. Using Belle as an example, at the end of the film, she frantically tries to warn the Beast that the townspeople are coming for him. Disheartened without her, the Beast does nothing to save himself when Gaston tries to kill him. It is only at Belle's arrival the Beast is revived with newfound strength, pushing to the climax where Gaston falls to his death and Belle saves the Beast from the same fate as she pulls him back up. Dying from an earlier deathblow from Gaston, yet satisfied with a last look at his beloved, the Beast has finally learned the true meaning of love. At the quiet utterance of Belle declaring her love for him, the Beast magically turns back into the blonde-haired-blue-eyed Prince right as she thinks he has died. It is Belle that reverses the curse and ultimately saves the lives of everyone in the castle.

But her actions seek only to further the romantic male-female relationship. By asserting her feminist qualities of strength and ability, it is really only a mask until the patriarchal order is back in place—until the Beast magically resurfaces into the Prince. Underneath the mask, Belle really does want to find true love, really does want to marry him, and live her fairy-tale ending. The only destiny, it would seem, for the heroine would be in the romantic ends of marriage, and the "happily ever after" of a family. The film clearly defines "right" feminism and "wrong" feminism in terms of which romance to pursue—Gaston is the wrong man, the Beast the real Prince Charming.

Downey agrees that the film is told from a male's perspective in the Beast, but argues that it is not completely masculinized, as Belle's experiences are also significant as expressed in the narrative (190). (One could argue about whose story it really is, since Belle seems to get equal, if not more, screen time). Belle is seen as a "funny girl" by the townspeople, presumably because of her more feminist qualities. But, as Kathi Maio says satirically, the most feminist thing about Belle is that she likes to read ("Disney's Dolls"). To contrast to Belle's more modern woman, Gaston tells Belle, "It's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas and thinking."

Downey uses Belle's book as a symbol of her independence, which Gaston finds threatening to himself as he first throws the book into the mud, and later muddies them up with his feet (195). The audience is led to decidedly dislike Gaston and, as Belle accuses, his "primeval" notions of women. Maio believes that in spite of Disney's attempt to take on a more feminist outlook, Belle still remains more or less the same as female Disney protagonists before her. From the very onset of the film, Belle is seen with a book, and when she encounters the baker and tries to tell him about the book she just read, he is

not interested, interrupting her by talking to someone else. The quality of being well read strikes the townspeople as odd, adding strength to the subtext that feminist notions are unnatural and deviant when opposed to the “normalcy” of patriarchal society. Even Belle’s beauty keeps her distanced from everyone (recall Doane), since, though she is beautiful, she does not use her attractiveness to get herself a husband and settle down.

Gaston tells his sidekick Lefou that because Belle is the most beautiful girl in town, and that this “makes her the best.” As Cynthia Erb points out, “this is standard heterosexual male projection, for Gaston imagines that Belle’s beauty makes her a valuable object, not recognizing that the source of his pleasure resides not in her body but in the culturally inscribed mechanics of his own vision” (66). Again, the mask of feminism—her attributes of beauty—only covers the underlining message that beauty itself is an object. Later when the Beast holds her prisoner, contemplating the possibility of Belle being the means of breaking the spell (that is, for them to fall in love) he laments, “Oh, it’s no use. She’s so beautiful, and I’m—Well, look at me!”

Based solely on her beauty, Belle is objectified as automatically being the means to an end of the curse. Even Belle’s name, meaning “beauty” in French, objectifies her, for Gaston only wants her because he believes (and, more importantly to him, everyone else believes) she is beautiful, while he is indifferent to all other attributes that make her internally beautiful. Because of his shallowness and narcissistic nature, Belle finds Gaston repellent, the last man she would ever marry (contrasting to the Beast who she eventually learns to love because of his gentle nature). Her decision to reject him is ridiculed by three other girls who watch and swoon over Gaston, again asserting Belle’s independence and ability to reject conventions.

Belle herself sings about her longings of more than “this provincial life,” seeking more as she has vicariously lived in the books she reads. Her favorite book, she tells the book clerk, is about “far-off places, daring sword fights, magic spells, a prince in disguise.” Only all too similar to the life she will come to know within the film narrative. In the reprise of the earlier song, she sings of wanting “more than they’ve got planned,” having just been proposed to by Gaston to be his “little wife” in the previous scene. However, she lives out her fantasy of being swept away by a Prince Charming, so to speak, by the end of the film. So in spite of her “feminist” quality of being learned and educated through reading, her predilections for romances uncover the mask of feminism, as she swoons at her book’s mention of “Prince Charming.” And though at the beginning of the film she longs for something other than the life that is expected of her by her fellow townsmen, and despite her dreams, she remains a devoted daughter despite her father’s reputation, literally preserving the patriarchy. Even in her rejection of Gaston and her choice to be with the Beast/Prince are the codes of patriarchy preserved. Though she rejects Gaston because of his narrow view of her feminine role (since he is only concerned with how she could serve him), ultimately she still plays the damsel-in-distress-turned-princess when it comes to being saved from her simple life.

Earlier in the film, as the prisoner of the Beast, Belle runs away after a frightful encounter with him in the forbidden West Wing (the wolves incident follows). Her independent character leads her to rebellion and disobedience to the Beast who forbids her to venture in the West Wing. She attempts to subvert the Beast’s control, is caught and harshly rebuked, causing her to run away. This is symbolic of her also running away from not only the external horrors of the unknown Beast, but from her chains as a prisoner-as-woman. The wolves themselves could be represented as society’s attempt to stop her. Similarly symbolic then is her return to the castle, back to the chains after a failed runaway attempt.

But this time it is her choice, this time without reservation. She sheds the mask of feminism as she tends the Beast's wounds and chastises him in wifely fashion, thereafter choosing to remain with him. She gives up her independence again. What is ironic is her last words of the scene: "By the way, thank you for saving my life." Referring to the earlier episode in which the Beast saved her from the wolves, her gratitude is symbolic of his saving her from the earlier "provincial" life she so longed to escape. Feminist theory would say that her sacrifice in the beginning of the film is that to patriarchy, and then enforced in her later submission to the Beast after he saves her, culminating to the traditional Disney "happily ever after" of marriage to the Beast-turned-Prince.

An important observation is in the evolution of the story of *Beauty and the Beast* from previous versions. In "The Curse of Masculinity," Susan Jeffords notes that in no versions other than Disney's is the story told from the Beast's perspective, by explaining the curse at the beginning instead of the end (166). This leads the audience to sympathize more so with the Beast knowing what is at stake for him. Also, in previous versions, it is an evil fairy, not a magical enchantress, that turns the Prince into a beast, and though outwardly he is ugly, he maintains his gentle nature. In the Disney version, the Beast is horribly selfish, resulting in the curse. He must then not only cause someone to love him, but to also love that person in return. This person is never questioned to as anyone other than a woman (Jeffords 167), and his love is never challenged as whether it must be heterosexual. The story becomes the Beast's more than Belle's (and arguably, then, the gaze is masculine as well) to continue the patriarchal tradition of Disney.

A closer look at Downey's article, "Feminine Empowerment in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*" in comparison to Doane's theory of the masquerade demonstrates how the gaze can be read outside of a male gaze. Downey analyzes the film by attempting to construct the Female Glance within the narrative. Regarding fairy tales, Downey observes that the heroine is "a totally powerless prisoner" (185), but goes on to argue that *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* "enact[s] empowerment and pleasure for women viewers" (188). The film not only supports "a central male character whose problems can be corrected only through a woman's help" but also "a woman's emergent needs can be satisfied only through a man's internal transformation" (193). Downey deconstructs the film by showing forms of resistance and empowerment and the paradox of power from both male and female perspectives. She notes that in the first part of the film, the male gaze is established, but the middle shows an alternative female glace. However, in it all, the original conflict of the Beast's curse remains (Downey 203).

Doane's alternate readings coincide with Downey's analysis of *Beauty and the Beast*. Both the Beast and Belle find romantic fulfillment in one another; the power of the Beast and Belle are demonstrated in how they change one another; and the film enables a perspective for both male and female spectators, male and female glances (Downey 208). Through the film narrative, Belle is seen as foregrounding her feminism in order to gain certain positions against the patriarchy—the father, the Beast, and Gaston. But reverting back to her submission to a conservative end only reveals the masquerade. The reinforcement of a heterosexual romantic idealism remains within the central narrative as Downey points out since her identity is still through the male (Downey 208).

Marwan Kraidy's article about Disney's *Aladdin* (1993) describes Jasmine in quite the same terms as one would Belle. Jasmine, like Belle, is "on the surface strong and independent but in fact submissive and dependent" (Kraidy 50). Both have no mothers (the closest construction of a motherly character is Rajah, Jasmine's pet Bengal tiger, and Mrs. Potts, the enchanted teapot/maid of the Beast's castle), and the highly repressive sexual tones in both texts (*Aladdin* and *Jasmine* are always interrupted before a kiss; the Beast is

a beast) (Kraudy 52). But as Aladdin sings, “I will open your eyes” to Jasmine, putting him in the ideologically dominant position as the male lead, the Beast similarly was the one to release Belle from her “provincial life” into the world of the enchanted, into the world of the fairy tale she desired as in her books. Unmasked, Jasmine and Belle show their fulfillment through their male counter-parts, never quite standing alone, as they initially desire.

At first, Belle is strong, independent, and intellectual. But as the film progresses, she becomes dependent and attached to the Beast, and though well read and intellectually curious, her romantic inclinations ultimately revert back to the Disney heroines of old. She wears the mask to please an audience looking for an alternate reading other than the one described by Mulvey. Appealing to a broader audience, *Beauty and the Beast* remains popular despite the undercurrents of patriarchy, or, depending on the viewer, maybe even because of them. It is the mask that deceives. And while the movie presents so many different masks—the enchantress as an old woman, the Prince as a Beast, Gaston as a handsome man, the castle servants as enchanted objects—Belle’s is the most deceptive from a feminist point of view within the movie, since it is not blatantly revealed in the text.

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